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"LOL, No, I Didn't Read": Students' Difficulties with Choosing Strategies for Success

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The purpose of this investigation was to examine how student expectations for their performance in a class related to strategies used to succeed in that class. Results from our study suggest that, even though students are good judges of their academic capabilities, they are not any more or less likely to engage in effective learning strategies even when they begin the semester expecting lower final grades.

Engaged students earn higher grades, show gains in their critical thinking, and show stronger persistence in their education (Carnini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Arguably, student learning and student engagement are "a joint proposition" (Coats, 2005 p. 25; Davis & Murrell, 1993, p. 5), meaning that instructors and students work together as partners in the learning process. Much research has focused on ways in which instructors can improve student engagement, ranging from emotional support and teaching development programs to flipped classrooms, social media and gamification (Buckley & Doyle, 2016; Clark, 2015; Connolly, Savoy, Lee & Hill, 2016; Ruzek et al., 2016; Zheng, Han, Rosson, & Carroll, 2016). Less, however, is known about the role of the student in this process.

Unfortunately, not all students are prepared for the college environment (Sheehy, 2012). As such, students are often poor judges of strategies that will help them to succeed in a course. They frequently lack effective study skills, time management, and organizational skills (Cushen et al., 2019; Gurung, 2002; LaCount, Hartung, Shelton, & Stevens, 2018; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Despite these hurdles, it is possible that they are aware of, and capable of overcoming these hurdles. Research shows us that high-school students tend to overestimate their academic capabilities (Stone & May, 2002). However, self-concept becomes more stable and accurate throughout adolescence (Cole et al., 2001), which may mean that college students could be more effective judges of their academic capabilities.

The purpose of this investigation was to determine if students are, indeed, effective judges of their academic capabilities and if lower expectations for class performance, early in the semester, leads students to attempt better learning strategies to

improve their performance. We hypothesized that students would be able to predict their performance in a class, and that those with lower expectations for performance would engage in strategies meant to improve their engagement in the course and, subsequently, their academic performance outcomes.

Method

Ninety-four students (i.e., 74 female, 78 Caucasian, 26 freshmen, 25 sophomores, 24 juniors, nine seniors, nine graduate students) were enrolled across five courses taught by two instructors. During the first two weeks of the semester, a course graduate assistant distributed informed consent forms. The graduate assistant placed the completed forms in a sealed envelope that was not opened until after final course grades were submitted to alleviate student anxiety, reduce perceptions of coercion, and to prevent any instructor bias to student grades. Students were informed of these protections before deciding to consent to the study. Then, students completed a questionnaire packet containing the following measures:

Study habits. Students reported whether or not they had read for the current class period (yes, no, some). Eighteen reported that they had fully read the material, eight reported that they had read some, and 67 reported that they had not read at all.

Expected course grade. Students also reported the final course letter grade that they expected to earn in the course. Expected grades were converted to a 4.0 scale (A=4.0, B=3.0…) with ambiguous answers averaged where appropriate (i.e., "An A or a B" = 3.5). Average expected grade was 3.40 (*SD* = .57).

Instructor rating. Students rated their instructor using a 19-item end-of-course evaluation survey standard to the university. Unlike end-of-course evaluations, though, students were instructed to use their experience in the current class period, rather than the semester as a whole, to rate their instructor. Students rated their instructors on a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1(*very poor*) to 6(*excellent*) in domains such as "class organization," "instructor enthusiasm," and "student confidence in instructor knowledge." Higher scores represented higher evaluations of the instructor. Average instructor rating was 5.11 (*SD* = .62).

Student Engagement. Students rated their current class period experience using items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE; 2007). The five NSSE items asked students to rate how much they believe the current class period emphasized memorizing, applying, analyzing, or evaluating course material or using information to form new ideas. Students rated their level of agreement on a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1(*very little*) to 4(*very much*). Higher scores represented higher engagement. Averages on the individual NSSE items ranged from 2.63 to 3.20.

Academic data. In addition to the questionnaires, attendance was recorded at the beginning of each class period, and reported here as the percentage of class periods during the semester for which students were present (M = 90.49%, SD = 12.01). Lastly, we recorded final course grades, based on performance on exams and assignments, in percentage points (M = 81.55%, SD = 10.01).

Results

In order to test the hypothesis that students are able to predict their course performance, we ran a bivariate correlation between expected and final grade and found that students' expected grades did, indeed, relate to their actual final course grades (r = .60, p < .001).

Next, we examined the associations among measures of engagement and engaged behaviors (i.e., attendance, textbook reading, and course and instructor evaluations). Using bivariate correlations, we found that student attendance positively related to the evaluation of the instructor as well as some of the NSSE items (see Table 1).

Additionally, one-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine whether students who read felt more engaged in the five NSSE domains (e.g., application). Results indicated that students who read reported that the current class period required them to analyze material [$F(2,90) = 4.06$, $p = .02$; $M_{nonreaders} = 2.94$; $M_{partialreaders} = 3.63$; $M_{fullreaders} = 3.22$] and form more new ideas [$F(2,90) = 3.21$, $p = .04$; $M_{nonreaders} = 2.70$; $M_{partialreaders} = 3.13$; $M_{fullreaders} = 3.22$]. Readers, non-readers, and partial readers did not differ on any of the other NSSE items (F's < 2.42; p's >. 09).

Finally, bivariate correlations tested whether students with poor performance expectations would engage in more strategies for success. Unfortunately, students' expected grades in the course did not relate to their attendance (see Table 1), nor student reading behavior [F (2,88) = .07, p = .94].

Discussion

The current investigation sought to examine students' ability to predict their academic achievement and if they use these predictions to more actively engage in the learning process. Results suggest that while students were able to predict their performance in a course, even early in the semester, those students with low performance expectations did not more heavily engage themselves in the course. This has important implications for instructors wishing to encourage their students' learning, particularly when those instructors are working with students who traditionally may have lower academic performance expectations.

Our work suggests that students are relatively good at predicting their performance in a course. We interpret this optimistically: students are accurate judges of their

capabilities and could be taught ways to improve their learning and, potentially their academic self-concept. That said, there is also a potential negative interpretation. Perhaps some of our students enter the classroom with low expectations for themselves and those low expectations lead them to restrain efforts to fully engage in a course, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Researchers in childhood self-esteem describe a "cycle of failure" in which children with low self-esteem have low expectations for themselves that cause them to reduce their effort in a task. This reduced effort, along with heightened anxiety, lead to actual task failure, which only serves to reinforce the original negative self-image (Feldman, 2006). It is possible that some of our students may be in this cycle. Indeed, 6.5% of our students began their semester expecting a grade of C or worse in their course. Given this aforementioned cycle, it is quite logical to find that students who expected to earn a poor grade in the course might struggle with finding the motivation to read a textbook or attend class.

There are a number of factors that can influence a student's academic expectations. Women and minority group members, for example, expect that they will perform more poorly in the classroom (Mayo & Christenfeld, 1999). People also have higher expectations for their performance on cognitive assessments if they have had access to similar assessments in the past, but only if they had not failed those assessments (Maertz, Bauer, Moseley, Posthuma, & Champion, 2005). Personality and career expectations can also play a role in these expectations (Pike, 2006). Thus, certain students may be disproportionately more prone to low expectations and this cycle of failure, and it becomes important for instructors to identify these individuals and guide them.

That said, it is important to note that our data do not show a pattern of less engagement in students with poor performance expectations. Rather, those with poor expectations are not proactively seeking out engagement. Perhaps this is a less difficult problem to disrupt. In our study, student behaviors (i.e., reading and attendance) positively related to their engagement. Students who had regular attendance and who read their textbook in preparation for class rated their instructor more positively, and reported that the course encouraged them to apply information and form new ideas. Perhaps future research can focus on ways in which we can emphasize this information to our at-risk students so that they, too, can experience the benefits of engaging themselves in the learning process.

Taken together our results suggest that although students are good at predicting their academic performance, those students with lower expectations do not use that knowledge to actively engage themselves to potentially improve their outcome. We, as instructors, have a responsibility to our students to potentially use this knowledge to help students with low performance expectations improve their engagement and ultimately their learning in the course.

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Appendix

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations between Attendance and Course Engagement Measures	
	Attendance
Expected Grade	*.215*
Instructor Evaluation	*.276**
NSSE Memorize	*-.116*
NSSE Apply	*.319***
NSSE Analyze	*.176*
NSSE Evaluate	*.136*
NSSE Form Ideas	*.240**
*Note. * p <.01; **p<.001*	